Berkshire DIVIDEND STRATEGY

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Dividend Growth Commentary
4Q 2025

TURNING THE PAGE FROM 2025

Jan 2026

Happy New Year! 2025 was quite a year, with the market swinging from extreme fear to extreme greed. Overall, the year ended with Berkshire clients enjoying solid portfolio appreciation. In a gyrating market marked by a lot of emotion and violent price swings, a balanced long-term approach still suits us best.

Here's a quick recap:

- **Early-year swings:** The year started with tariff headlines and uncertainty that created one of the swiftest corrections on record. Later in the year, the market swung manically to the upside. The trick, as always, is staying disciplined throughout both extremes.

- **Returns & downside protection:** We believe dividend portfolios again "passed the test." We observed much less downside than the market during the early-year panic and steady appreciation when markets rallied — that's always our goal.

- **Berkshire's proactive positioning:** In March and April, we made thoughtful adjustments to improve quality. We believe the turnover added meaningful alpha for the year and improved the portfolio's long-term potential.

- **Berkshire's leading sectors:** Financials (particularly money center banks) and select technology provided tailwinds. Financials benefited from better loan growth, improved credit quality, and healthy capital markets. Our tech holdings include the tried-and-true mega-cap leaders, which we see continuing to demonstrate exceptionally strong cash flow, fortress-like balance sheets, and sensible valuations.

- **Berkshire's lagging sectors:** Some areas underperformed, not because the businesses were broken, but because of timing or pressures in the sector. Consumer faced GLP-1 and cost issues; healthcare had policy noise; certain industrials moved slower than the economy might suggest.

- **Berkshire's dividend scorecard:** 36 companies increased their dividends, averaging 7%. That's exactly the kind of steady income we aim for. (Source: Bloomberg)

- **Outlook for dividends:** Most headwinds from the past—rates, inflation, tariffs, political noise—have appeared to ease. Companies with strong cash flow and balance sheets should keep raising dividends, and at these valuations, dividends are likely to get preference over buybacks.

- **Market context:** Everyone seems obsessed with the Fed's next decision, but the economy appears in decent shape. A market downdraft might arise from too much exuberance in stretched growth sectors, and a tech/AI overbuild financed with a lot of debt and private credit.

Berkshire Asset Management, LLC (Berkshire) is a fee based, SEC registered advisory firm serving the portfolio management needs of high net worth and institutional clients. Our guiding principle is a belief that success can be achieved by combining rigorous, well-crafted investment processes with an exceptional level of client service and attention to detail. Asset Management with a Difference... Diligence, Integrity and Focus. Berkshire Asset Management, Inc. was formed in 1986 as a SEC registered investment adviser. In 1999 the company was sold to Legg Mason. In 2007, senior leadership repurchased the firm, forming Berkshire Asset Management, LLC, the company built to serve you today.

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- **Our watch word for 2026:** "Careful" History tells us when markets are this elevated price-earnings-wise, future returns moderate. Our own internal regressions mirror Howard Marks of Oaktree.

As is customary with our year-end tradition, we keep our market commentary short but use this opportunity to review our philosophy and detail the step-by-step analytical framework we use to pick the stocks in the portfolio.

We welcome your feedback and appreciate the opportunity to work with you.

DIVIDEND STRATEGY PROCESS REVIEW

The Berkshire Dividend Growth Strategy's primary objective is intended to generate a growing stream of equity income through investments in a diversified portfolio of stocks generally with a high, "safe" and growing dividend. If we can achieve this primary goal by purchasing vibrant growing companies with fine economic prospects, capital appreciation can follow. A risk profile below that of the average stock in the S&P 500 is also viewed as desirable. Because of its dividend growth orientation, the portfolio also seeks to perform better than non-dividend-paying stocks or bonds in a rising interest rate environment.

EQUITY SELECTION PROCESS

Importantly, we believe intelligent dividend investing is not just composed of shopping for the company with the highest yield. Our process spans across three dimensions: current level of the dividend, "safety" of the dividend, and, notably, the growth of the dividend.

CURRENT DIVIDEND

First, we identify companies that have a dividend yield at least that of the S&P 500, preferably higher. Companies that fit this criteria may perform better in a slow-growth economy and could provide a cash buffer through equity market volatility. In certain instances, the portfolio may purchase securities with nominal or below-average dividends, but only if there is a clear and relatively certain path to normal cash payouts. Philosophically, however, we don't believe in paying a high price for a future promise.

GROWTH OF DIVIDEND

If our portfolio is going to provide an effective hedge against inflation and provide appropriate cash flow, it is critical that the company under evaluation demonstrate the prospects for future dividend growth. This is one of the most important parts of our screening process and what we believe makes our strategy unique relative to other dividend strategies.

First, we seek a company that has a history of raising the dividend. This gives us good insight into management's view of the dividend, how they allocate shareholder capital, and prospects for growth opportunities within the business itself.

A key metric we use to quantify growth prospects is return on shareholder equity or ROE. In our opinion, return on equity (ROE) is the best financial yardstick to identify, evaluate and compare the desirability of investments. ROE is the rate of growth a company can maintain in its earnings and dividends, without needing to raise capital. By decomposing ROE into its component parts, we understand the 4 key dynamics that drive company profitability, namely:

- Operating Margins: Operating Profit/Sales "How profitable are core operations?"
- Asset Turnover: Sales/Assets "How capital intensive is the business?"
- Leverage: Assets/Equity "How much does the company's use of debt affect returns?"
- Tax Retention: Pretax Income/Net Income "How well does the company manage its tax obligations?"

Keep in mind there is no "right" number for ROE or any one of the individual components. Some companies have high but volatile ROE's and some companies have lower but highly stable ROE's. Both can be equally desirable. A company that has very stable operating margins and consistent sales growth allows for management to utilize (think drugs or consumer staples) versus a company that is more cyclical (think semiconductors or energy companies). In the end, the evaluation of ROE can be a highly reliable metric. Other subjective factors that may play into our process include competitive positioning in the company's end markets, intangibles such as brands and patents, past acquisition strategies of management, and volatility of earnings, just to name a few.

SELL DISCIPLINE

While there are many factors, some quantitative and some qualitative, the goal is to buy companies with an attractive, “safe” and growing dividend so that the risk-adjusted total return profile is superior.

SELL DISCIPLINE

A company is typically sold when it: reaches a price beyond our estimate of intrinsic value, ROE falls below acceptable levels, loses its superior competitive position in the marketplace, abandons sound dividend policy, increases debt to uncomfortable levels or does a misplaced acquisition.

PORTFOLIO CONSTRUCTION

As long as there are attractive candidates, the portfolio will attempt to be broadly diversified across a wide range of economic sectors. While the portfolio will be largely “bottom up” some consideration to macro factors may play a minor role. At any one given time certain portfolios, in aggregate, may appear more attractive than another (fundamental or valuation wise). However, large or extreme sector concentrations relative to the benchmark in general should not occur. In aggregate, we seek a final portfolio: reduced systematic risk, above-average quality, and lower volatility. From a cash flow perspective, we believe a typical Berkshire holding can deliver cash flow growth of at least 7.5% per year, and the yield on the portfolio should exceed the S&P 500. If our companies can deliver earnings and dividend wise, attractive appreciation should follow and thus providing strong total return characteristics.

RISK AND PERFORMANCE CHARACTERISTICS

We owe our investors a frank discussion of potential risks associated with our strategy and baseline expectations of our performance in various market conditions.

Dividends arise from the profits of a business after all other legal obligations to other providers of capital have been satisfied. These include trade creditors, bank loans, senior bond holders, subordinated bond holders, preferred shareholders and of course taxes owed to the government.

The dividend is last in line. So, while these claims are mandatory, dividends are paid at the discretion of management. Some management teams view growing the dividend as an “implicit promise”, while some managements want to remain flexible to right size the dividend if they need to adapt to their changing business and capital needs. For a very stable business with low capital needs, the former approach is appropriate. For businesses that have higher capital needs but perhaps higher growth prospects, the latter approach is appropriate. Dividend policy often sends a powerful signal about how management views its own prospects. Management needs to make tradeoffs between growing the business and maintaining the dividend. Not all decisions will be correct.

There are no guarantees even the best businesses remain profitable, that past growth rate of dividends will continue, or that management will remain committed to its dividend. So, there have been instances where a dividend appeared “safe” only to have management cut it at some point due to: deteriorating business conditions, or even they, at their discretion, find what they think is a better use of the money. We believe our screening and fundamental research will be effective at selecting the managements capable of generating the type of cash flow growth our clients expect.

As for share price fluctuations, we stick to the premise that risk and return are directly related. The Berkshire Dividend Strategy seeks a risk posture that is below that of the S&P 500. So, in theory, the portfolio could perform better in a declining market, but we are realistic about its prospects in a rapidly rising market – particularly one characterized by speculation and where low-quality assets are coming back in favor. Still, in that rising market we expect a total return can potentially beat inflation and satisfy individual client objectives.

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DISCLAIMER: